DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 442 442 HE 033 040

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TITLE Increasing Multicultural Awareness through Correspondence: A University-School Partnership Project.
PUB DATE 2000-04-00
NOTE 31p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 24-28, 2000).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College School Cooperation; Computer Mediated Communication; Cross Cultural Training; *Cultural Awareness; *Electronic Mail; Higher Education; Internet; Literacy Education; *Middle School Students; Middle Schools; Multicultural Education; *Preservice Teachers; Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

This paper describes an e-mail-based correspondence project between 56 pairs of university-school partners: pre-service teachers enrolled in a multicultural education course, and middle school students enrolled in language arts classes in a culturally diverse, economically depressed community. The purpose of the critical action research project was to offer the pre-service teachers an opportunity to interact with students of diverse cultural backgrounds and to offer the middle school students an interesting way to engage in literacy development. Partners corresponded with each other for 10 weeks. Data examined includes letters written during the 10-week period, end-of-semester pre-service teacher project reports, weekly instructor field notes, faculty/pre-service student dialogue journals, and a questionnaire completed by middle school students at the conclusion of the project. Positive outcomes were seen in both student populations, including a broadening of multicultural awareness and improvements in skills development. The paper also discusses the advantages and disadvantages of technologically mediated communication. One disadvantage noted was the difficulty students had in interacting with someone they had not met; it was suggested that correspondents should be allowed to meet at the beginning of the correspondence. (Contains 38 references.) (CH)

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Increasing multicultural awareness through correspondence: A university-school partnership project

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Paper to be presented at the annual conference of the
American Educational Research Association
New Orleans, LA
April 24-29, 2000

ABSTRACT

This paper provides a description of an e-mail based correspondence project between two sections of a college multicultural education course and students in two language arts classes in a middle school. Undertaken within the framework of critical action research, the purpose of the project was to offer the undergraduates an opportunity of interacting with students of diverse cultural backgrounds in a rural, economically underprivileged community and to provide the middle school students an interesting way to engage in literacy development. The analysis of student letters, post project feedback, classroom discussions and observations yield several positive learning outcomes for both student populations that pertain to their academic, social and cultural development. The discussion of the results include the advantages and disadvantages of technologically mediated communication in such a partnership project, the challenges of implementation as well as the merits of such a project in a course in multicultural education.

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Rationale and purpose

Despite the acknowledged importance of courses in multicultural education in Teacher Education programs, there are obstacles to pre-service teachers reaching the many goals for which multicultural education is intended. These obstacles include a) the relative lack of personal experiences of pre-service teachers with persons of cultures different from their own, and b) the tendency of classes in multicultural education to focus on theoretical discussions with few opportunities for student to apply their knowledge in practical ways in the community (Banks & Banks, 1997, Bennett, 1999, Gay, 1995). The undergraduates enrolled at the institution central to this project faced an added disadvantage. There is an overwhelming demand for field placement of pre-service teachers in local schools. As a result, students and their instructors in courses where field work is not mandatory are discouraged from seeking additional opportunities for such experiential learning.

This paper focuses on a collaborative action research project between pre-service teachers at Florida Atlantic University (FAU) and the students of a middle school (MS) in a culturally diverse, economically depressed community. The student population of the middle school comprises 50% classified as Hispanics (including children of Guatemalan and Mexican migrant workers), 28% classified as Black, and 22% classified as White or "other". Of these students, 83% are on the free and reduced lunch program. The school had barely made the required scores in Reading and Mathematics to stay off the governor's "critical list". Due to its rural location the school rarely had any volunteers from local colleges and universities.

The project, which emerged from these institutional needs, was designed as a correspondence partnership between pre-service teachers enrolled in two sections of a course in multicultural education at the university and students in two English classes at the middle school. The project was intended to address the pre-service teachers' need for greater personalized exposure to students from cultures and experiences different from their own, and the need of the middle school students to be offered an exciting and personally engaging means for improving linguistic competency.

Central to this paper are the learning outcomes of this correspondence project for the student participants in both institutions. Specifically, the following three questions will be addressed: a) How does interaction with a student of a different cultural and experiential background facilitate multicultural awareness of a pre-service teacher? b) How does participation in a correspondence partnership enhance literacy skills and academic motivation among students? c) To what extent does the medium of correspondence (rather than direct interaction) facilitate or hinder the goals of multicultural awareness and academic motivation?

Theoretical perspectives

This project draws on the principles of critical-emancipatory action research (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988, Noffke & Stevenson, 1995) which exemplifies a philosophical commitment to democracy in education. Action research is undertaken by educators to address practical problems in the teaching context (McKernan, 1991). This project was premised on the institutional needs outlined previously as well as professional needs that have emerged in teacher education. These include more university-school partnership (Montero-Sieburth & Gray, 1992, Sirotnik & Goodlad, 1988), and the re-definition of the role of teachers as "reflective practitioners" and "researchers" (Kincheloe, 1991, Ross, 1987, Schon, 1983, Short, 1993).

This university-school partnership was especially beneficial because it provided pre-service teachers first hand knowledge of the everyday experiences of school children contextualized in the politics and ideology of the educational administrative culture. Pre-service teachers experienced the rewards and challenges of teaching and learning in a particular school context and acquired knowledge, skills and the commitment to working with

similar school populations. The project also provided pre-service teachers the opportunity to develop the skills of self reflection as they critically examined their own interactions and their impact on the partnership. Furthermore, the pre-service teachers were initiated into the research process by having to write a project proposal that specified their personal goals in the project and then provide documentation and commentary on how those goals were achieved in their project report. Ongoing class discussions provided a context for students and instructor to examine the meanings and implications of particular correspondence and emergent themes or issues, to ask questions about appropriate responses or educational policy and practice and collectively identify solutions for dilemmas encountered in the project.

Cochran-Smith (1995) underscored the importance of action research in teacher education, especially in the area of multicultural education, noting that it provided "generative ways for prospective teachers, experienced teachers, and teacher educators alike to work together in communities of learners – to explore and reconsider their own assumptions, understand the values and practices of families and cultures that are different from their own, and construct pedagogy that takes these into account in locally appropriate and culturally sensitive ways" (p. 495). As critical-emancipatory action research, the project was designed to facilitate pre-service teachers' critical self-reflection on a) the assumptions and biases inherent in their responses to students of different backgrounds, b) the social and political context of schooling and c) their own potential to contribute toward greater equity, social justice, and humane conditions in schooling and society (Zeichner & Gore, 1995).

The goals of the project reflect the focus of the multicultural course within which it was framed. This course in multicultural education was grounded in a multicultural and social reconstructionist approach (Sleeter & Grant,1999) which is based on the principles of critical pedagogy (Aronowitz & Giroux 1991; Giroux, 1989; Freire,1996; McLaren,1998). Central to this approach is the assumption that education is a political process, and the imperative that critical educators should seek to uncover and dismantle the patterns of hegemonic practice that marginalize certain groups in educational and social contexts. The course was designed to build students' capacity to examine patterns of marginalization within educational and social contexts based on factors such as race, class or gender; to uncover and confront the sources of their hidden biases and prejudices; to recognize that problems of social inequity should be "owned" by all its members; and to develop an attitude of caring through social action (Banks, 1996; Noddings, 1992). Each of these objectives is reflected in the learning outcomes of the project described in this paper.

The project was designed to include several characteristics of "progressive" literacy education (Oakes & Lipton, 1999). These include the importance of viewing writing as embedded in a specific sociocultural context (as opposed to being a decontextualized ritual of inscription), a means of self expression (rather than being de-personalized and irrelevant encoding) and inherently enjoyable (not an inherently tedious task that one "had" to do in school). The project also addressed the students' need for multiple opportunities for writing and was viewed as a means of helping students learn the conventions of writing (such as spelling, grammar, punctuation and protocols of the genre) (Delpit,1988; Dyson,1989; Hall,1987; Klein,1985; Routman,1996). The correspondence provided a meaningful context within which students were able to engage in authentic communicative tasks, with an "audience" that they had not previously encountered (Oakes & Lipton, 1999). Students were free to communicate on topics of their own choosing and were thus able to draw on experiences external to their schooling, often with rich personal meaning.

This project was modeled on the work of Britsch and Berkson (1997) who combined these characteristcs in a similar university-school e-mail correspondence project. However, their research focused primarily on learning outcomes for the child correspondents. The project described herein enhances the scope of this design because it is framed as having a mutual educational benefit for the participants in both institutions. Unlike the Britsch and

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Berkson (1997) project which involved graduate students as the adult correspondent, this project was designed for undergraduates.

Method

Design

The project involved 56 pairs of university-school partners enrolled in classes taught by the lead researchers, a professor at a university and a middle school teacher. The partners corresponded with each other weekly for ten weeks. Although originally designed as a solely electronic mail project, the unexpected non-availability of e-mail at the middle school resulted in the students handwriting their letters which were delivered to the university by a member of the community. The university students replied via electronic mail addressed to the school account of the middle school teacher (with a copy attached to the professor). All incoming and outgoing letters were read by the lead researchers prior to being delivered to their recipients. Although both sets of students were provided general guidelines for the correspondence and specific advice was provided when necessary, the letters were largely independent efforts in communication. During the ninth week of the project the middle school students made a field trip to the university where they met their correspondents, participated in a variety of activities which included the opportunity to use e-mail, and toured the university with their partners.

Participants

The 56 undergraduates volunteered to participate in the project to fulfill a course requirement of a social action project which entailed community activity. Of these students 67% were Anglo-American, 19% were African American, 8% Hispanic and 6% were internationals. Eight nine per cent were female. Of the middle school students 59% were Hispanic, 24% were African American and 17% were Anglo-American. Forty two per cent of them were female.

Data collection and analysis

Data were gathered from several sources. These included all letters written during the ten week period, the project reports presented by the pre-service teachers at the end of the semester, weekly field notes of the instructors, dialogue journals exchanged among both instructors and the pre-service teachers, and a questionnaire filled out by the middle school students at the conclusion of the project.

Data were analyzed through a process of constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). This entailed the identification of emergent themes in each week's letters that pertained to the academic, social or attitudinal development of the correspondents, and the recording of key issues that emerged from each week's correspondence or instructor observations. These were recorded in field notes and discussed in weekly dialogue journals between university students and the instructor. In addition, common themes in references to the project and the middle school that emerged from the natural flow of class discussions and readings, and the purpose and impact of such topics were also noted. The themes that emerged from observations, analysis of correspondence, dialogue journals and post-project questionnaires and reports were triangulated (Denzin, 1994; Patton, 1990) with the purpose of identifying the benefits of the project to students' academic, cultural and social development, and to note evidence for future modifications of the project design.

Results

Included in this section are the positive outcomes of participation in this project for both student populations. These include a broadening of their multicultural awareness, an improvement in necessary skill development, as well as indications of positive long-term benefits. All names are pseudonyms.

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Benefits to the pre-service teachers

In focus in this section is the manner in which participation in the project enhanced the quality of the pre-service teachers' learning experience. The outcomes pertain to increases in students' general multicultural awareness, skill and attitudinal development.

"Theory" becomes "reality"

In writing about the impact of the project on their learning experience, one of the pre-service teachers noted:

> I would not have got the chance to see theory in action in a traditional class, nor to have seen the impact I can make in the life of a relative stranger. Because the project allows students to put theories and concepts learned in class into a context, they learn by example, how MCE (multicultural education) works. [I-PR-ST]

Participation in the project helped students to make connections between relatively "abstract theory" to more "concrete practice". This was particularly evident in lessons about the impact of social class and linguistic background on student's academic achievement in the USA. Whereas discussions of social class and education by Anyon (1981) or Kozol (1992) are often viewed by these predominantly middle class students as problems of "others" (even if viewed with shock and occasional sympathy), these students began to explore the implications of such discussions for their penpals, and subsequently for students in S. Florida. Concern was voiced about the physical conditions of their penpals' school, their budget allocation, the standard of the curriculum, the academic expectations of the teachers and school overcrowding. Students recognized that while the middle school exemplified many of the challenges associated with Kozol's and Anyon's observations of impoverished communities, not all teachers held low expectations of their students. As one of the students noted in a project report:

> After meeting with (teacher) my whole view on the struggles for a teacher, due to the economic situation of the students, to have a successful academic year completely changed. (She) appeared to be a normal woman, but different because she shows compassion in what she is trying to achieve with these students. (She) was so excited about the project and that kind of attitude reflects in the students. ... I feel so encouraged by what I saw in (teacher), a devotion to her career. I would like to work with children who are economically challenged because I hope to help children that really need support. [I-PR-NU]

In discussions of linguistic diversity, students who had typically supported an "English-only" perspective (all of whom were monolingual), began to appreciate and understand the struggles of students who were non-Native speakers of English. Their concerns were evident through the following questions and comments raised during class discussions.

> Are the standardized tests, especially in Math., available in translation?
>
> Petrona' is already petrified about her regular class tests, and she's such a bright kid. I can't imagine what an exam like this will do to her.
>
> Can a teacher translate the questions on the tests, or will that be cheating?

The ability to "personalize" issues discussed resulted in students not having to be "persuaded" that multicultural education was necessary, as is the case in other sections of the course. As such, the focus of classroom discussions shifted quickly from **why** multicultural education was necessary to **how** it should be implemented. Furthermore, students demonstrated more complexity in their thinking. Instead of viewing issues (such as bilingual education) in inherently dichotomous terms, students began to see the intermediate "gray" area, and become comfortable with engaging perspectives that supported divergent positions.

Learning about the "other"

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The project also offered pre-service teachers the opportunity to interact with students, the majority of whom were of significantly different cultural and experiential backgrounds. As one of the undergraduates noted, "Learning from this project of how to connect with a child of another culture is vital in becoming a more well-rounded educator." [I-PR-MC] This learning came from direct statements from their correspondents,"I live in a trailer park and the kids at school make fun of me every single day of my life" [I-M-W3] and from indirect indications in their struggle to write in English, or descriptions of their lives. Echoing the perspectives of many undergraduates, the following observation was made in a project report:

> Through our probing and prodding we found that most of these children did not have a home to go to where mom was waiting with milk and cookies. Most of them either go home to an empty house or to a place where they become caregiver to younger siblings. [I-PR-WK]

The pre-service teachers learned to pay attention to their correspondent's interests and use them as a basis for communication. An undergraduate stated,

> He had told me in his first letter that he liked reading and language arts, so I thought I would take a chance and send him a funny poem for Valentine's Day"... What I did not realize was that after the first poem that I sent him, he expected more. [I-PR-NB]

This particular correspondence was characterized by an exchange of poetry. Furthermore, the child's interest in fishing (a topic mentioned in over 60% of letters) was central to the gift purchased for this correspondent when they visited the campus: a book titled "My Fish Got Away". As noted by the undergraduate, "I knew about his love for fishing, and figured that this was a statement that he could easily relate to. All of the lines in the book rhymed like a poem." [I-PR-NB] The undergraduates also reported that they had begun to listen to music, watch movies and read books in which their correspondents had expressed interest, so as to "understand where the child was coming from." As a student reported, "I ended up watching lots of movies, some of them rather unsuitable for children, because this was all this kid talked about. But this way, s/he had someone to discuss the content of the movies with." [I-N-W3; W10]

Self awareness

One of the purposes of the multicultural education class is to make students aware of their biases and how they could affect their interactions. The weekly analysis of undergraduates' letters revealed several examples of what we, as a group, termed "middle class bias": the tendency to use one's middle class experiences as the sole basis for understanding or interpreting their penpal's experiences. The following excerpts exemplify this concept:

> You have a cow for a pet? What an unusual pet! [I-BS-W3]
>
> What is it like to be in such a large family? [I-CD-W3]
>
> What did you do on your birthday? Did you have a party or get any cool stuff? [I-AS-W1]

Comments about "unusual" pets and "large" families were plentiful in the first three weeks of the correspondence. Nevertheless, many middle school students stated that they had cows (and bulls), pigs, chickens and goats as pets. Although hardly "unusual" among this population, these were animals that none of the undergraduates had ever owned. Similarly, appropriate family size was based on the undergraduates' perspective. Yet it was not uncommon for the middle schoolers to have families in which there were at least four children.

The question on the birthday provides a stark contrast to a statement written by a middle school student: "We didn't do anything for my birthday because my mom says we are running out of money." (I-M/WK-W2). Many of the undergraduates had addressed the topic of birthdays and this poignant statement led to much reflection and discussion on our assumptions about birthdays. Such a discussion underscored the pre-service teachers'

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assumption that their penpals could and would celebrate birthdays in the same way that they did.

At the end of the project the pre-service teachers commented about their tendency to stereotype their correspondents based on the information that they had received at the beginning of the project indicating that 83% of this middle school population was on the free and reduced lunch program. As one of the pre-service teachers noted, "The thought of working with children from economically challenged homes just scared me, because of the stereotype that they are aggressive and disrespectful towards authority." [I-PR-NU]

Many undergraduates also observed that their penpals were "smart". Further discussion revealed that, because of the poverty level and low test scores of this population, undergraduates assumed that their penpals were not very bright. When discussing suggested modifications of this project, a group of students noted that they should not be provided the demographics on poverty because "It inevitably makes you stereotype." This led to spirited discussion as evident in the following comments:

> Isn't the purpose of this course to teach you not to make these stereotypes?
>
> These students are smart, and this has nothing to do with their poverty level. They're not smart relative to how much money they have. [II-FN-W12]

Critical reflection

Another benefit of this project was the opportunities it provided the pre-service teachers to engage in critical reflection. For instance, many students expressed frustration with their penpal's failure to answer their questions or to write in greater length. After being informed that, for some middle school students, the few lines in their letter was as much as they ever wrote in school, and after being encouraged to think about how their own letters "modeled" the response desired, many undergraduate began to focus less on their correspondent's failures and concentrate on how they could improve their own writing.

Students were also thoughtful about how they presented themselves to their correspondents. As one pre-service teacher noted,

> My overall objective was to encourage, empower and educate ... without being heavy handed or preachy. It occurred to me early on that we wouldn't have an equitable exchange of ideas or opinions if I were standing on a figurative soapbox. I found that loosely guiding our correspondence, using her responses as jumping off points for my own remarks was the best way to create a multicultural, multi-perspective exchange. [I-PR-ST]

Another noted the reflection necessary in crafting responses:

> This project was not designed for recreational writing or writing a friend or relative far away, but was designed so students may experience and have meaningful interaction with someone of different cultural backgrounds through purposeful writing. ... Many minutes, even hours were spent reading, preparing and responding to these letters. I read pages of different theories on multicultural education and learning styles. I wrote outlines for the letters I sent to my penpal, careful to respond sensitively. [I-PR-AJ]

The pre-service teachers were also able to think critically about educational issues in general, linking their observations from this project to broad based practices.

> My first thought when listening to Jose's accent was that maybe he had a speech impediment, but then I realized how his cultural background influenced the way he spoke, and how my cultural background influenced my inability to understand everything he said. I began to wonder about the people inside and outside of the education system who quickly dismiss any intelligence and capabilities in adults and children simply by hearing an accent. [I-PR-NB]

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Students also began to take an interest in state politics, examining the impact of policy on their correspondents. For instance, in class discussions, students expressed their outrage about a plan to eliminate music and art as high school electives (a reaction absent in many classes that were not associated with the project). They noted that for many of their correspondents who were struggling with achievement in the 'traditional' subject areas, art and music seemed not only to be an escape from the monotony of school, but also the most viable basis for future achievement. In fact, some of the undergraduates had encouraged their penpals to think of the arts as a possible "major" in college, and the music rooms and the art gallery were among the places visited on the campus tour.

Benefits to middle school students

The data included here demonstrate the fulfillment of many of the goals of multicultural education central to the course. Specifically, the results show how participation in the project enhanced students' motivation and skill levels in the language arts and inspired higher level educational aspirations among a population for whom most had never met someone (excluding their teachers) who had been to college.

Increased motivation

A significant outcome observed by the classroom teacher was the excitement that the project generated among the students. Letters were eagerly anticipated each week and were enthusiastically replied. There was an increase in self esteem among the students who felt "special" because they had their own penpal from the university. Students noted the following in their responses to the overall project:

> The penpal project was good because I had someone who would not laugh at me.
>
> The project helped me feel important enough to have questions answered.
>
> The project helped me to feel that someone likes you enough to write to you. [BC-FN-W12]
>
> The project was helpful because it made me feel wanted. [I-AG-PQ]

Perhaps most significant improvement in self esteem and confidence was the social transformation of Paulo, a child who shied away from social interactions at school. In conversations with his teacher (the few conversations he had) he hid most of his face in his jacket. As the project progressed, Paulo gradually emerged completely from his jacket to be able to initiate communication with his teacher. This communication typically revolved around eliciting help in writing his response to his penpal, an activity he pursued with keenness and obvious satisfaction.

The excitement generated by the project allowed students to view the writing process as fun. As evident in following excerpts, some students distinguished this from "work" and others saw "writing" (usually linked with 'academic' tasks, and thereby unappealing) as being similar to "talking" (typically a more social activity and more appealing). This is especially significant because many of the students were writing in their second language.

> The project was helpful because she help(ed) me talk better, say things better. She help(ed) me like writing. [I-MM-PQ]
>
> I liked the project because we got to write. [I-PF-PQ]
>
> We had a friend to talk to every week. [I-SM-PQ]
>
> I learn(ed) how to write letters. I have someone to talk to and write to. This is my first time having a penpal. [I-NM-PQ]
>
> I got something that I never got before, a penpal. I got to get some minutes off from working by writing my letters. [I-SL-PQ]

Social bonding

A significant outcome of this project was that it facilitated the forging of interpersonal relationships between the two correspondents. These relationships tended to

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be especially significant to the younger correspondent. Many students signed off their letters with "best friends forever" and almost all middle school students noted that the benefit of this project was that it helped them find a new "friend"

> I have a new friend, which means I don't have many friends. [I-RD-PQ]
>
> I know I have a friend and I can talk to them. And when I need to talk to them I can. And when I need them, they are there. And when you write to them, you can tell them things. [I-DA-PQ]

Likewise, the undergraduates noted that they felt honored to be viewed so easily and early in the correspondence as "friends". For many adults, the fact that the children of a different culture had "accepted" them as a friend was particularly salient and cause for reflection on their own biases at that age.

Also unique about this friendship was that it crossed age and cultural boundaries. The fact that this friend was older, and preparing to become a teacher created a context in which the adults emerged as role models and mentors to the middle school children. In some cases, the adult correspondents served simply as "someone who would listen". The significance of this opportunity was noted by one of the middle school students, whose adult correspondent had worried about adequately addressing the child's needs.

> The project was helpful because I could talk to someone older. Because in my family people don't really listen. You finally have someone to talk to. At my house when you ask something, they will say, "I am busy". [I-SM-PQ]

On many occasions the adult correspondents helped resolve personal dilemmas, offered advice on a variety of issues, including grades, boyfriends and how to cope with their parents' divorce. This mentorship was facilitated by the fact that the middle school students readily trusted their university penpals disclosing personal problems and information from very early in the relationship.

> The project was helpful because you wouldn't get in that much trouble. You got your mind off certain things. You got to get all your feelings out. You could trust them. You got to tell them secrets. [I-SG-PQ]
>
> She solved some of my problems. She gave me advice. [I-LM-PQ]
>
> I liked the project because we could write to people that we can trust to keep secrets. [I-SB-PQ]

As part of the project design the correspondents did not have an opportunity to see what the other looked like until much later in the relationship. This was to facilitate relationships built solely on the written word (and the personality that emerged from the writing) and not on physical appearance. Closer to the field trip, the middle school students began to wonder what their penpal looked like and photographs of the undergraduates were sent to them. The class teacher observed increases in self esteem among the children who perceived their correspondent to be "good looking" and some disappointment among others whose appearance did not conform to their expectations or to the traditional social norms of beauty. These responses were the basis of self reflection in the middle school classes with a focus on acceptance and the relationship between personality and appearance. Also of interest was the middle school students' tendency to assume that their correspondents were "beautiful" and this beauty was linked to Euro-American features (even among the few who were not of this background, and had discussed their culture with their correspondents). Similarly, many of the middle school students drew self portraits to their penpal using light colors for skin tone, even though they were more darkly pigmented. The excitement and the activities of the field trip generated renewed bonding and in all cases the disappointments appeared to have been overcome by the end of the project.

Better quality work/ improved academic focus

Perhaps as a function of wanting to impress their "university" friends, the middle school students became very conscientious about correct grammar, spelling and punctuation in their writing. They constantly consulted the dictionary, each other or the teacher for correct spelling. Students wrote multiple drafts of their letters, other letters bore evidence of extensive erasing and re-writing indicating the effort expended in writing.

Students also learned the importance of responding to their penpal's questions and the necessity to inform them about what was happening in their lives. As the semester progressed these patterns emerged in students' letters as they conscientiously attended to both these tasks. The correspondence also obliged the writers to be clear in their writing, mindful of the fact that their penpals were often unfamiliar with the experiences discussed. Students recognized the impact of the correspondence on the quality of their work, as evident in the following:

> I learned how to write letters. [I-VB-PQ]
>
> It helped me to learn to write correctly. [I-TJS-PQ]
>
> I got to spell better. [I-DD-PQ]
>
> It helped me learn how to write a letter more better. It kind of straightened up my handwriting. [I-SL-PQ]
>
> I liked the project because she keeps me thinking. She keeps me writing. [I-MS-PQ]

It should be noted that improvements in academic focus and motivation among these students were observed by other teachers in the school. Improvements among specific students as well as in the classes as a whole were commented upon.

Exposure to the college experience

Students were also exposed to the lifestyle of people who were, one the one hand quite different from them because of their age, but on the other hand, were similar in that they were students. As exemplified in the following excerpts, students enjoyed the "difference" in their penpals and were intrigued by the similarity.

> We got to talk to older people.... We got to know how their life was. [I-LM-PQ]
>
> We got to know other feelings from different people.... And it showed that it doesn't matter about ages. [I-SG-PQ]

Their similarity as students prompted questions and comments about common educational experiences (such as tests and grades) and college life in general.

> We got our report cards and .... my grades went down. I got a 2.7 the first time and now it's a 2.1. I am not doing good in history, reading and math. .... Oh Mimi,what kind of grades do you get in college? [I-SL-W3]
>
> How did you do on your test? Good, I hope. Economics and Management, I don't know what they are. Please tell me. [I-SB-W4]
>
> I'm going to try and go to college, if I have the money.... By the way, how much did it cost to go to college and why? [I-SB-W6]

The students' questions challenged the undergraduates to talk about college life honestly, but in a way that would not intimidate their younger correspondents. College was described as school on a much larger scale, concerns about costs were allayed by informing students of loan opportunities and advise and encouragement were provided on test taking and grades. These discussions intensified around the time of the field trip to the university, when the students were taken on a "tour" of the library, gymnasium, classrooms, resident halls ("You actually live in your school?!") and computer lab.

The impact of these discussions and the tour resulted in what seemed to be (for the adults involved) the most gratifying outcome for the middle school students: college aspiration. It was clear by the end of the field trip that the concept of a college education seemed more accessible and exciting to the students.

Charlene answered all my questions about FAU. She told me FAU wasn't hard. She encouraged(d) me to study harder. [I-NM-PQ]

They have a nice school. I want to go there someday. [I-DA-PQ]

She got me thinking of going to FAU. [I-RD-PQ]

They told me about college, that nothing can stand in the way of that, and encouraged me to go. [I-SB-PQ]

I liked the project because it gives you the idea to want to go to college. [I-SE-PQ]

The parent chaperones on the field trip also endorsed the potential impact of the project and the field trip. One noted, "They need to get out of their little community and realize that how much there is outside." [I-FN-W10] Another wrote to say, "This was an experience I am sure none of us will ever forget. I know the children will always think of FAU as a safe and friendly place, a place where they will always be welcome." [I-FN-W10]

Discussion

The purpose of this section is to discuss diverse facets of the project design and their positive and negative impact. Central to this discussion is the attempt to address concerns about the use of electronic mail as a means to engage pre-service teachers in "action" research (which is typically seen as occurring in the "actual" classroom context), the appropriateness of undergraduates (especially non-seniors) serving as mentors and senior correspondence partners, and the effectiveness of multicultural awareness gained through technologically mediated communication with minimal opportunity for direct contact with students of diverse populations. The discussion is also intended to provide educators who are interested in implementing similar projects information about the strengths and weaknesses of the project design.

Advantages and disadvantages of technologically mediated communication

There were several advantages to the fact that the communication took place via e-mail. First, such a medium allowed the undergraduates access to a class that represented diverse cultural backgrounds, even though it was not within the vicinity of the university. Pre-service teachers were able to get to know children vastly different from themselves, without having to incur any expenditure of time, money and energy in travel. Second, such interaction took place without disruption of the social dynamic of the middle school classes, and with no need for coordination and supervision of visitations typically associated with field work. The third advantage of the technological facet of this project was that it allowed the undergraduates time to reflect on their responses before they actually e-mailed their correspondents. This would not have been possible with face-to-face communication. As the results indicate, the time to reflect on the child's letter and craft a suitable response was crucial to the undergraduates' ability to mentor their penpals. This time period also allowed for consultation with the instructor and colleagues on ideas for appropriate responses. E-mail also offered both instructors the opportunity to monitor the undergraduates' communication to ensure appropriate responses. Thus, the e-mail-based communication allowed the pre-service teachers to be taught about appropriate communication even as they engaged in it; yet the adverse effects of the pre-service teachers' mistakes were not felt by the middle school students.

Despite the many advantages, there were a few disadvantages to the e-mail based interactions. Sometimes the meaning of a child's statement was unclear. Unlike in the case of direct person-to-person communication, it took an additional week for students to seek clarification of such miscommunication. By the time such clarification was received, the point of the conversation, or the importance of the idea was long gone. This also led to the tendency for pre-service teachers to "read" too much into their correspondents' letters and worried about possible emotional or social problems , with no immediate mode for

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clarification. Furthermore, for many students, interacting with someone they had not seen became difficult. As many as 40% of the undergraduates noted that the relationship between correspondents was "solidified" only after they met. With all students, the relationship was taken to a deeper level after the meeting. As a result, many students argued that the correspondents should be allowed to meet each other at the beginning of the correspondence rather than at the end.

These concerns resulted in several adaptations and modifications during and after the project. The classroom teacher reminded students that responding to their partner's questions was an important component of an appropriate reply. Undergraduates were instructed to limit their questions and model the response that they desired. Undergraduates were encouraged to e-mail the class teacher directly if clarification was needed on a child's welfare. The most significant change in the project design was that the field trip to the university was scheduled for the 6th week in the next implementation of the project. Based on student feedback a field trip to the middle school was also added.

Practical issues in implementation

As mentioned previously, an advantage of the project was the opportunity for pre-service students to serve as mentors to younger correspondence without any detrimental effects due to their inexperience. However, this was possible because of careful monitoring of the correspondence by the instructors. For instance, the college students' letters were due in by Friday evening, so that they would be available to the children on Monday. To ensure this, the college instructor would check the e-mail, and send out reminders to procrastinators. On occasion, the instructor wrote personal letters to the middle school children because their correspondent had failed to send in a letter on time. The instructor also read through all letters and, on occasion, sent letters back to be revised because of what was deemed inappropriate subject matter (we had agreed as a class that discussions of romantic relationships, night life etc. were best avoided) or for extensive grammatical and spelling correction. Though this monitoring was helpful for the purposes of analysis, it was extremely time consuming and this must be taken into account when using undergraduates as mentors.

The successful partnership between the correspondents also depended on the personalities of the penpals. Partners were chosen in a primarily ad hoc manner. Middle school students with particular needs (e.g. language-based, emotional, self esteem) were identified by the teacher so that the university instructor could take care in making selections for those students. However, given that these choices were made in the third week of the course, such decisions were often made intuitively. It was to everyone's credit that the relationships worked out as well as they did. Nevertheless, there were some relationships that developed more strongly and deeply than others. Among the latter were two undergraduates who seemed relatively uninterested in communicating. Although they wrote every week (often after a reminder from the instructor), their letters were short, uninformative and lacked engagement. In both these cases, their middle school correspondents made attempts to surreptitiously "adopt" a second partner!

The overwhelming success of the project must be credited to the outstanding personalities of the pre-service teachers who were willing to work with vague and ambiguous direction as the project took shape, and whose enthusiasm and energy molded the project to give it "a life of its own." Although this is difficult to predict at the beginning of the semester, students' personalities and sense of adventure have a significant impact on the project and its implementation.

Applied multicultural education (MCE)

Although this project was taken on as a facet of an already-full course curriculum, students seemed to appreciate it for its relevance to the course and for the "hands-on"

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opportunity to understand the principles of multicultural education. Several students noted in their reports that the project helped them to "learn lessons that could not be found in a book or research project". Another observed,

> I thought the e-mail project was an excellent project to undertake. It puts everything we learned in this class into perspective, sort of like an MCE applied learning project, though we don't necessarily get a clear view of the scope and significance of the project until the very end. Everything just seemed to come all together in the very end. I would not have gotten the chance to see theory in action in a traditional class, nor to have seen the impact I can make in the life of a relative stranger. Because the social action project allows students to put theories and concepts learned about in class into a context, they learn by example, how MCE works. [I-PR-ST]

Similarly, the project offered the middle school students an opportunity to engage in active and reciprocal language development. They were able to work on their linguistics "skills" as stipulated in the curriculum, learning the importance of punctuation, grammar and spelling, as well as the communicative protocols of letter writing in a deeply personal exercise. The fact that these students were excited about writing in English, felt compelled to write "correctly" about their own experiences, and generally mistook this correspondence for an extra-curricular activity rather than as one central to their curricular objectives, underscores its benefit to these students. The fact that the pre-service teachers could engage these students in critical thought, or compel increasingly higher levels of linguistic competence facilitated crucial skills development among both groups of students. In an educational culture that preaches the importance of "hands-on activity" but relies heavily on worksheets and "drills" as primary modes of instruction and practice, this project offered both groups of students a creative and enjoyable way to learn lessons that has the potential for a lifelong impact.

Conclusion

The general purpose of this paper was to describe a university-school partnership project undertaken in a course in multicultural education for pre-service teachers. Its particular purpose was to encourage educators to engage in similar, mutually beneficial, creative efforts to enhance the learning of students, especially those in "failing" schools, as well as their future teachers. In a context where both groups of learners are engaged in learning complex lessons (multicultural awareness and literacy) the personalized experiences undoubtedly enhances the learning process. While this paper documented the short term effects of the project, the fact that it could facilitate outcomes that would be manifested only after several years, might be its strongest feature. A pre-service teacher alluded to this potential when summarizing the project's impact: "It started out being an assignment that would remain with us the entire semester. It ended up being an opportunity that will stay with us throughout our entire lives." [I-PR-MC]

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